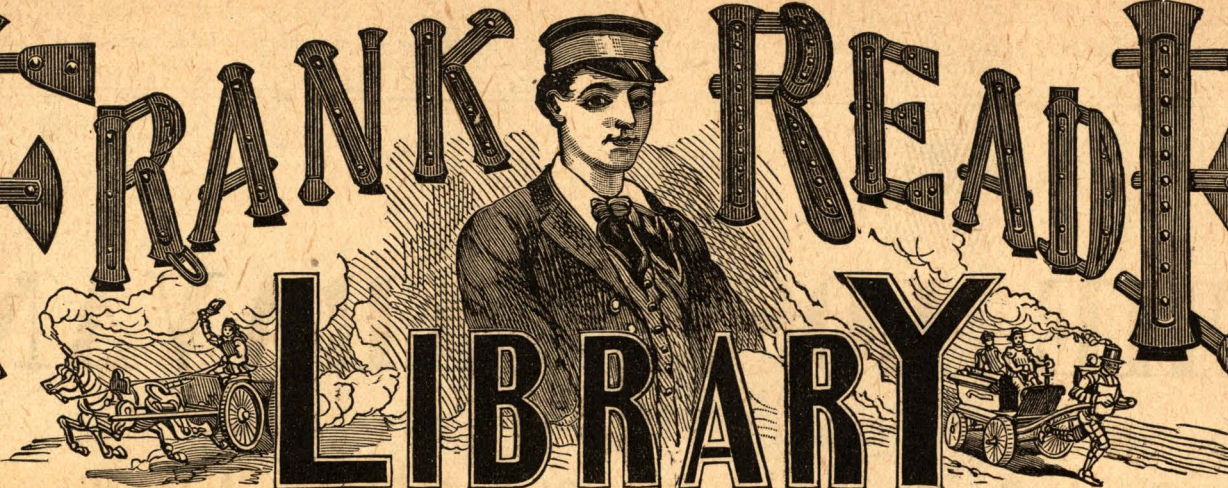


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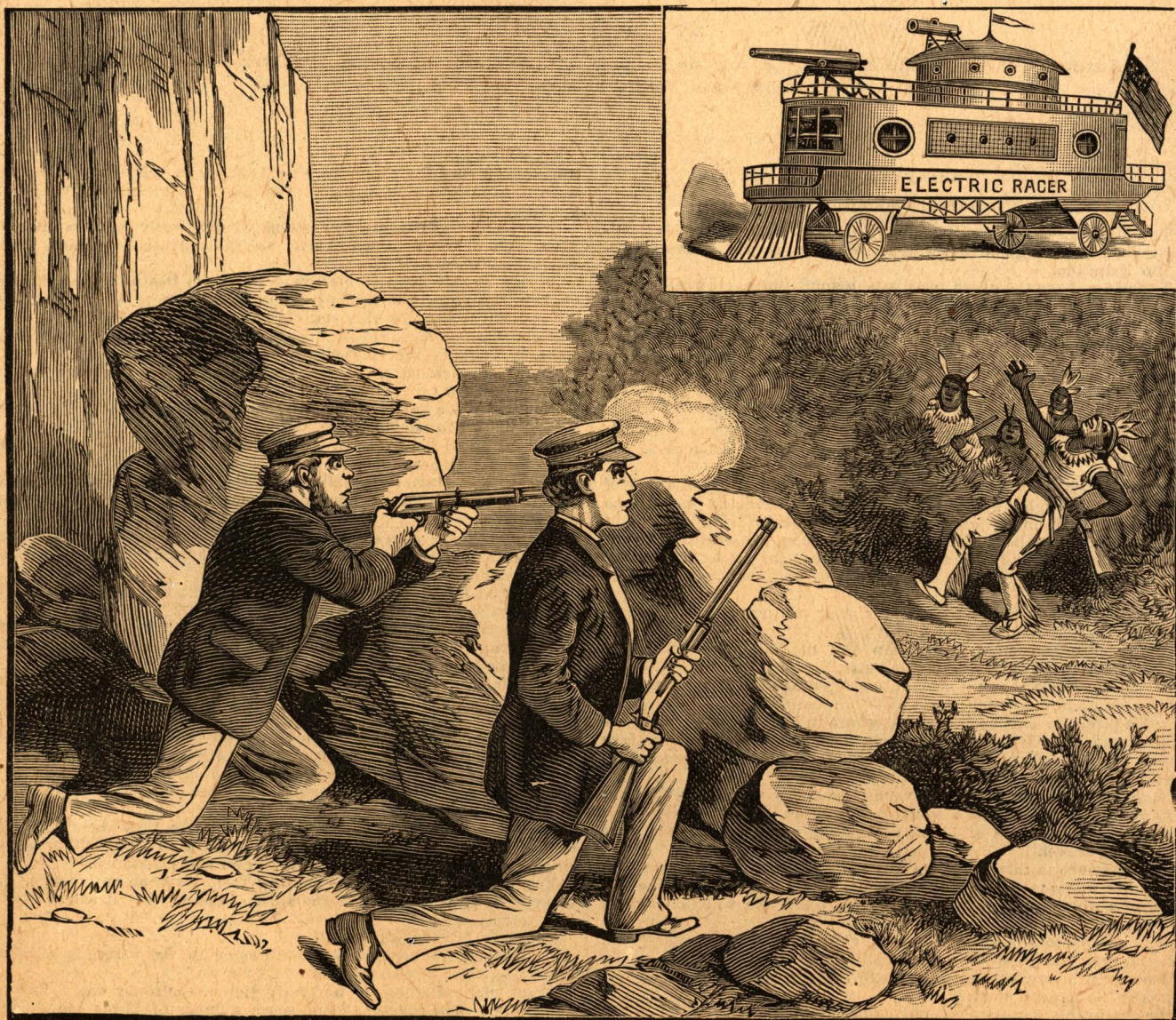
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The Lost Caravan:

or, Frank Reade, Jr., on the Staked Plains
With His "Electric Racer."

By "NONAME."



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THE LOST CARAVAN;

OR,

Frank Reade, Jr., on the Staked Plains With His "Electric Racer."

A STORY OF THE WILD SOUTHWEST.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Across the Earth," "Along the Orinoco," "The Coral Labyrinth," "Over Two Continents,"
"Across the Desert of Fire," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE APACHE COUNTRY.

THE blazing sun of New Mexico one day looked down upon a thrilling scene in the verge of that wild and trackless region, known as the Llano Estacado.

Towering above the green plain was a high butte, crowned with a few scraggy trees. At the base of this, with a few bowlders to screen them, crouched two men.

One was an Irishman with a shock of red hair, a pair of twinkling blue eyes, and plenty of wit and shrewdness to match. The other was a tall, handsome and distinguished-looking young man.

They were intently watching a small clump of mesquite below. It contained what to them was a mighty peril.

For, lurking in that dense, leafy screen were a half score of savage Indians, the deadly Apache, who are the dread and scourge of the Southwest.

"Begorra, Misther Frank," cried the Celt, as he fingered the lock of his rifle, "it's mighty glad I'd be to get a fair crack at wan av the omadhouns. But niver a wan dares show his head!"

"You are right, Barney," said the young man, anxiously. "I can't say that I exactly like the situation. We are in rather a bad box here. If darkness overtakes us we might as well count our scalps as lost."

"If we cud only make the naygur hear us now!" cried Barney, "shure, it's bad ears he has onyway!"

"You must remember that Pomp and the Racer are quite a distance away on the other side of the butte."

"Shure, he oughter cum around to see phwat's the matther wid us! We've bin gone long enuff, sor!"

"He probably does not know just where to look for us," replied the young man. "We cannot blame him. Our hope lies in eluding these dusky rascals, and getting around to the other side of the butte somehow."

Frank Reade, Jr., was the young speaker's name, and he was known the world over as a wonderful inventor. He it was who had mastered the problem of aerial navigation, and solved the theory of submarine travel.

His presence in this out of the way part of the world was due to a desire for wild adventure and the opportunity to try his new Electric Racer—a wonderful machine and vehicle, which we will take a close look at a little later on.

His companions were two faithful colleagues, Barney and Pomp, one an Irishman, and the other a jolly African. They had left El Paso a month previous, and had experienced many thrilling adventures in the Apache country.

But upon this day they had unfortunately placed themselves in the embarrassing predicament in which we find them. Frank and Bar-

ney, feeling sure that there were no Apaches in the vicinity, had set forth to explore the butte which stood like a watch tower in the great, green plains.

The result was that they stumbled lucklessly upon a gang of Apaches, and were forced to seek the first available shelter, which was behind these bowlders.

So long as they held the messengers of grim Death in the cylinders of their repeaters, the Indians seemed satisfied to keep a safe distance. But it was this very state of siege which worried Frank.

Night was not far away, and he knew that when darkness should come, it would be very difficult to hold the wily foe at arm's length. It would be much better to make whatever aggressive move was in their power now.

To fall into the hands of the Apaches was certain death. They were seldom known to render mercy.

Frank studied the situation very closely, and he was bound to admit that it was a desperate one.

The savages seemed to understand the position of their intended victims, and were playing their cards accordingly. Theirs was a waiting game.

Doubtless there were enough of them to have easily overwhelmed the two white men, had they made an open attack. But this was not in accordance with Indian tactics.

Barney had been closely watching the clump of mesquite from his position. Suddenly he drew swift aim and fired.

The shot was a dead one. There smote upon the air a fierce, terrified yell, and a dark body went reeling back through the chaparral. One of the deadly foe had passed in his chips.

"Good eye, Barney," said Frank, approvingly. "Every one of those fellows we can get rid of is so much aid for us in getting out of this scrape. Get as many as you can."

"Begorra, av I cud only get me eyes on the omadhouns I'd soon foix thim," cried Barney, "but yez niver see wan av thim."

To fire at random into the mesquite would be folly as well as a waste of ammunition. So the two beleaguered men cast about for a change of position.

Back of them was the sheer wall of the butte. To their right extended the same, and an unprotected slope. To the left or south there were lines of bowlders extending for some distance.

But there was the risk of exposing themselves at any moment by essaying to pass from one to the other of these. Yet it seemed their only salvation.

Suddenly Barney whispered.

"Bejabers, Misther Frank, there's some av the varmints climbin' the butte, sor. It's all up with us if they do."

Frank glanced along the northerly side of the rocky wall. Far up, and beyond their range he could see a number of forms clambering up a steep ascent. Barney was right.

The purpose of the red fiends was plain. By gaining the top of the butte they could fire down upon the two white men who would thus be exposed to their aim. This was a calamity.

As Frank saw this move he knew that the time for action had arrived. There was no longer any question about it. As well die in the attempt to escape along the rocky wall as to submit to be shot from above.

So he drew a deep breath and said to Barney:

"There's only one chance for us. Follow me!"

"All roight, sor!"

The young inventor flung himself down upon his stomach. He began to wriggle like a snake across the open space to the next pile of boulders. Barney was close behind him.

Instantly from the mesquite clump there came the crack of rifles. The bullets glanced from the face of the cliff or plowed up the shaly ground.

One just grazed Barney's shoulder. But everyone knows how hard it is to hit an object prone upon the ground. Frank and Barney were not hit.

They were now safe behind the next pile of boulders. But they were still exposed to a shot from above.

At any moment the foe might reach the summit of the butte; then—the end would quickly come.

The two hunted men panted with their exertions. Creeping over that expanse of shaly ground in the glare of the pitiless New Mexico sun was no easy matter.

They rested for an instant in the protection of the boulders. For fifty yards they crept along behind these with immunity. Then the line of breastwork came to an end.

To go further must be to expose themselves certainly to the fire of the foe in the mesquite. To remain where they were was equally fatal.

In this desperate predicament Frank's keen eye hit upon a projecting shelf of rock which they had just passed. He returned to it, and to his joy, saw that it afforded protection from any shots from above. He muttered an inward prayer.

"Here we are," he said, "and here we must stay until succor comes, or the savages give up and leave us alone."

"Bejabers, they'll never give up," averred Barney.

"You may be right," declared Frank, "but it is our only hope."

So the two men crouched there while the sun sank momentarily lower. Finally it reached the horizon line, and twilight began to come on.

It could easily be seen that the red foe were waiting for the cover of darkness. Then they would consider the white men easy prey.

But Barney had not been idle.

Something prompted him to fall to examining the wall of the butte beneath the shelf of rock.

He suddenly gave a little exclamation.

"Be me sowl, Mистер Frank, phwat do yez think av this?"

Frank turned and saw that the Celt had dug away sand at the base of the cliff and exposed quite an orifice under it. The young inventor's heart gave a leap.

"A cave!" he exclaimed.

Then together the excited men enlarged the opening. It was so dark now that the redskins could not see what they were doing.

The plaintive gurgle of water was heard. Then Frank crept into the orifice and saw high walls on either side and the light of the stars above. A little trickling stream was beneath his feet.

Instantly he saw the truth.

Time, and a living spring of water had cleft a space between the walls of the butte and this extended for what distance to the southward he could only guess.

It was enough to reflect that this was a possible avenue of escape, so the two men proceeded to follow it.

Hastily they stumbled and splashed on down the little water course. The walls were in places so close as to give a tight squeeze.

But they kept on until suddenly the open plain, starlit and shadowy was seen ahead. Another moment they came out at the lower end of the butte. They had traveled fully a quarter of a mile and had given the red foe the slip.

Down an incline they slid and into the mesquite. Then rapidly they ran around the southern cape or extremity of the elevation.

A great white light smote upon their vision.

"The search-light," cried Frank. "There is the Racer, Barney! We have had a tight squeeze of it!"

Elated at so successfully eluding the foe, they ran on. A few moments later they were alongside the Racer, that wonderful vehicle, in which they were destined to experience the thrilling events of this story.

A cheery voice came from the Racer's side.

"Golly fo' glory! I done fo't y' folkse was lost fo' suah!"

It was the negro Pomp, and a moment later Barney and Frank were safely aboard with him.

CHAPTER II.

THE ELECTRIC RACER.

Of course Pomp was given an account of the adventures and narrow escape of his companions. His eyes stuck out like moons.

"Sakes alibe, honey!" he ejaculated, "if I hed jes' known anyting 'bout dat I cud jest run around dar an' train de 'lectric gun on dem cusses bery quick!"

"Begorra, we was wishin' yez wud make a guess at it an' cum

along!" declared Barney. "Shure it was a close call all the same fer us."

However, they were safe now, and Frank intended proceeding at once to leave the vicinity. But right here let us take a look at the wonderful invention called the Electric Racer.

In constructing the machine Frank had held in constant view the fact that they were likely to be placed in their travels in positions of danger and risk of life. Hence the necessity of providing means for offensive and defensive work.

The Racer was somewhat in the shape of a long and commodious van with sides of thin but tough steel capable of resisting a bullet at the shortest range. In the sides were two circular windows of plate glass with guards of steel netting. On each side, midway was a window, or rather section of steel network, through which the travelers could see all about them. In this netting were small loopholes for the use of the rifle in case of attack.

Forward was a large section of heavy plate glass, also guarded by a curtain of steel netting which could be lowered or raised as the exigency demanded. This was really the pilot house. Here was the steering apparatus and the key board by which the electric engines were directed.

For the motive power of the Racer was electricity, furnished by a storage system which was an invention and secret of Frank Reade, Jr.'s.

Forward of the pilot house was a small deck or platform protected by a guard rail. This was directly over the pilot or cowcatcher as it might be called, which ornamented the front of the vehicle.

The running gear of the Racer was wonderfully light and intricate in its mechanism. The wheels were of steel with pneumatic rubber tires. Soft springs supported the body of the vehicle.

Entrance was made by the rear where there was a small, railed platform, and a portable gangway.

The main platform on deck was upon the roof of the vehicle, and was protected all around by guard rails of brass. Here was placed the powerful electric search-light and also the electric gun, light and thin of shell, but capable by electro-pneumatic force of throwing a dynamite projectile a distance of a mile with destructive effect.

The interior of the vehicle was divided in several small compartments.

One of these was devoted to the cooking galley over which Pomp presided. Another was arranged with rows of sleeping berths, and beyond was the main cabin, so-called, where were the general equipments and arms necessary for the journey.

Forward of this was the pilot-house. The stores carried by the Racer were kept in compartments beneath the main platform or floor of the cabin. They were in compact form, for economy of space was strictly necessary aboard a vehicle of this kind.

Taken altogether, the Racer was an invention designed for safe travel in an enemy's country, where exposure meant death, and the protection afforded by the vehicle's steel walls was necessary.

In invading the Apache country, Frank could not have sought a better opportunity or field for the testing of the powers and merits of his machine.

The Racer was quickly under way, and the butte and the Apaches hovering about it, were quickly left behind.

By means of the search-light, travel across the darkened plain was easy. But Barney, who was at the wheel, was suddenly interrupted by Pomp, who came from the rear of the vehicle.

"I done tole yo' dey am follerin' us!" cried the dorky.

"Eh?" exclaimed Frank; "what do you mean, Pomp?"

"If yo' go back dere an' listen, yo' kin hear dere ponies' hoofs dead easy, sah!"

"Begorra, we kin outrun thim, I'm thinkin'," declared Barney, about to put on more speed.

But Frank said:

"Hold on!"

He sprang up through the trap to the upper deck.

It was but a moment's work to turn the glare of the search-light back upon the stretch of plain. A startling scene was revealed.

For six hundred yards in the rear of the machine the pathway of light was unbroken. Then it fell upon a band of mounted savages.

They had been spurting their ponies forward at a rapid rate of speed. But the sudden dazzling radiance which fell about them, brought them to a sudden and startled halt.

Barney brought the Racer to a stop at a motion from Frank.

Then the savages quickly recovered from their surprise; with distant yells they dodged to the right into the gloom of the plain.

They were thus for a moment invisible.

But only for a moment.

Frank switched the search-light about and kept them constantly in its glare. Finally the bewildered Apaches drew rein.

"Now is the chance," cried the young inventor, "keep the focus on them, Pomp!"

"A'right, sor!" replied the coon.

Frank sprang to the electric gun. It was on a swivel and easily trained. He drew a quick and careful sight.

Then he pressed an electric button. There was a click, a sharp swish and a slight recoil. The projectile was off.

It struck the prairie directly in front of the mounted savages. Had it struck in their midst they must all have been killed.

But Frank had no desire to take human life so ruthlessly. He always avoided bloodshed if he could.

He had aimed to strike the plain in front of them, and give them a fright. The effort was a success.

There was a terrific roar, and up into the air rose a mighty column of earth and debris. It was swept in a cloud among the redskins, and dispersed them like chaff.

Panic-stricken they rushed frantically away again in the direction of the butte. They were at a loss to account for the terrific burst of thunder and lightning or the terrible eye of deadly light which followed them everywhere.

"Be jabbers that settled the question fer thim!" cried Barney.

"You are right," agreed Frank. "I doubt if they will care to risk approaching so near to us again."

"I done reckon dey won't want to foller us any mo' now," averred Pomp.

"You are wrong there, Pomp," declared Frank. "You don't know the Apache. He is relentless and persistent in the carrying out of a purpose. They will keep at a safe distance, but they will never give up following us."

"Does yo' flink dat, sah?"

"You may be sure of it. Apache curiosity will lead them to do that. They will want to find out what manner of a vehicle this is, and what sort of people we are."

"Begorra, they'll moighty quick foind that out if they make a thry fer it," averred Barney.

The Racer now continued on its way. The episode had furnished diversion of an exciting kind, and the relaxation was now felt.

Pomp almost went to sleep while standing on the forward platform, and Barney said:

"Be off wid yez an' git in some sleep. Shure I may be after needin' some av that meself, an' I'll call yez up about three fer to take me place."

"I go yo' on dat, I'ish," agreed the darky, as he rolled down to his berth and tumbled in.

Frank sat up for some while in the cabin. He was much wearied himself, so finally he came forward and said to Barney:

"I believe I'll turn in for the night, Barney. Are you all right?"

"I am, sor."

"Keep the Racer to the northward. If anything happens warn me. Don't keep up much speed."

"All roight, sor."

By and by the moon came up and made the plain bright as day. The Racer rolled steadily onward over the smooth surface.

Finally Barney saw a glistening line in his front. It extended east and west as far as he could see.

"Bejabbers it's a river," he muttered; "shure it's no use to think av crossing that the night."

The Racer ran up to the shelving shore. The steamer was both broad and deep.

Barney ruminated a moment.

His first impulse had been to arouse Frank Reade, Jr., and ask his advice. But finally he decided not to do this.

He would remain where he was until daylight. There surely could be no risk.

It would be safer to attempt the passage of the stream by day. Moreover, Frank was in need of rest, and Barney was loth to disturb him.

In this open position no foe could possibly approach without being seen. Thus the Celt reasoned.

"Bejabbers, we'll wait here for the morning," he decided. "Shure, that's the best way."

He quickly extinguished the lights and put the hood over the search-light. Then he took his post on the upper deck, where he could keep constant watch of the vicinity.

The night wore on. It had its usual concomitants of noise, the distant yelling of coyotes or the shrill notes of night birds; but no appearance of a foe could be seen.

As he sat there Barney had begun to wax extremely sleepy. He finally consulted the chronometer. It was after two o'clock.

"That naygur has shlept long enough," he muttered. "Begorra, I think I'll call him."

He arose with this resolve uppermost in his mind.

But before he had reached the trap leading down into the pilot-house he paused. Then he rubbed his eyes.

"Bejabbers, how's that?" he muttered.

He gazed far up the silvery current of the river. There was no denying a curious fact.

Upon the waters of the stream there twinkled a distant star of light. It looked like a lantern, the signal light of some craft coming down the river.

The Celt gazed at it for some while. Then he formed a definite conclusion.

It was too fixed for iginis fatuus. Nothing in the category of Nature's forces could account for it. Human agency alone was responsible for the mysterious light.

CHAPTER III.

THE RAFTSMEN.

SATISFIED of this fact, Barney pursued his deductions.

The curious light was advancing. It was coming down the river current and must soon be opposite the Racer.

Who were these midnight travelers upon the river? What was their errand? Were they red or white? Friend or foe?

The Celt was now wide awake. He acted upon a sudden resolution.

"Bejabbers, there's only wan thing to do," he muttered; "an' that is to let Misther Frank know. Shure, I don't loike to call him, but thin, it's only phwat he told me to do."

Down through the trap went the Celt.

A moment later he was at Frank's bunk. In an instant the young inventor was wide awake.

"All right, Barney!" he declared. "I'll be right up!"

It took but an instant for him to spring up. He got into his clothes and then joined the Celt on the deck.

Frank gazed long and steadily at the light.

It was plain that he was also puzzled. It seemed to be rapidly increasing in size.

"It is a mile away," he declared. "We could hit it with the search light."

"Shure, yez are roight," agreed Barney; "Shall I turn it on, sor?"

"Not yet, Barney; let them get nearer, and then we can better identify them."

Crouching by the search-light, the two men watched the distant light, and counted the moments as it drew nearer.

Steadily down the river it came. As it drew nearer it enlarged, and then Frank whispered:

"It is a torch of wood!"

"Begorra, that's risky, av it's whoite men they are," averred Barney.

"You are right," agreed Frank. "There could be nothing more sure to invite an attack from the Apaches. It would attract them for miles."

With intense curiosity, Frank and Barney watched the approach of the unknown and rash voyagers. It seemed as if they must be literal greenhorns in prairie craft, or they would never have thus so clearly exposed themselves.

Frank waited until they were within a few hundred yards. Then he reached forward and pulled the hood from the search-light.

A great pathway of intense light shot over the river's surface. It showed a raft made of logs and propelled by long sweep oars.

Then it was easily seen why the river voyagers had dared to travel with a torch in such a conspicuous manner.

They were protected upon the raft on four sides, a wall of logs was built, behind which the voyagers could safely hide. They need fear no shot from the shore.

It was really a floating fort, and that it was well manned our adventurers speedily found out.

With the sudden flashing of the search-light, the long sweep oars ceased to work, there were sounds of confusion, and faint voices aboard the raft.

It came to an instant stop and there was the creaking of ropes which would seem to indicate that anchors were cast. And there it swung in the middle of the stream.

Between the logs our adventurers fancied they could see the gleam of rifle barrels, and Frank muttered:

"They may give us a shot. We had better get down behind the gun shield, Barney!"

"All roight, sor!"

This was done.

Those on board the raft were of course unable to see the Racer on account of the blinding glare of the light. For some moments the situation remained thus.

Then Frank broke the ice. Raising his voice, he shouted:

"Ahoey the raft!"

The murmur of voices was heard, then a hearty voice came back:

"Great bufflers! Air yew white or redskin?"

"White!" replied Frank, "but who are you?"

"We are a search party from Tascos up in ther Pan Handle. I'm ther leader, an' my name is Bill Bent, cowboy an' scout!"

"Glad to know you, Mr. Bent," replied Frank; "what are you in quest off?"

"The lost caravan," was the reply. "Yew ain't cum acrost it, hev ye?"

"The lost caravan!" exclaimed Frank. "What do you mean?"

"Jest thet, an' no more. But before we go any further; who air yew?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr.," replied the young inventor.

"Never heerd tell on ye! What kind uv a light is that air?"

"It is an electric light."

"Sho. Yew don't say? Wall, it's a powerful one I kin own up. Haow do yew carry it?"

"It is carried on board this vehicle, the Racer," replied Frank. "If you will come ashore I'll show you!"

There was a moment's silence.

Then came the hail again.

"I say, strawnger!"

"Well?"

"What be yew goin' ter?"

"Nowhere in particular. I am traveling through the West for pleasure."

"Thar must be a heap in it. Haow many in yer party?"

"Only three. How many in yours?"

"Ten," replied Bent, readily; "thar war twenty-two when we left Tascos, but we've rubbed agin the Apaches too many times."

"Well, Mr. Bent," cried Frank, "I think we understand each other. I would like to have a talk with you. Will you come ashore to-night, or shall we wait until daylight?"

"If it's all ther same to yew we'll wait until daylight."

"All right."

This terminated the confab. But daylight was not far away. Frank was deeply interested in the raft and its occupants. He was determined to know what had brought them into this danger ridden region.

He felt sure that it was some heroic or philanthropic object. These men would never have sacrificed twelve lives and incurred such risks for nothing.

Barney was completely tired out and retired to rest. But there was no more sleep for Frank.

There, anchored in mid-stream, the raft waited for the coming of day. As the gray light increased the raft became visible to Frank as did the Racer to the raftsmen.

At length the sun appeared above the horizon. Then the raftsmen crowded the log breastworks of the raft, and gazed with curiosity and wonder at the Racer.

"Wall, I'll be durned!" shouted Bent. "What kind of a loker-motive hev yew got thar, my friend? Dew yew travel around in that?"

"Sure!" replied Frank. "Come ashore and I'll talk with you."

"I don't see why we hadn't oughter trust each other," said Bent, "but this air is a tough kentry!"

"Have no fears," said Frank, with a laugh. "I am not a foe. If I am willing to trust you, why you ought to be willing to trust me."

"Right, strawnger," cried the rough leader of the raftsmen. "I'm comin' off tew see ye!"

The next moment a light canoe put off from the raft. Bent and a companion were the occupants.

Bent was revealed as a powerful, broad-shouldered fellow of good height, and a type of plainsman. He was armed to the teeth.

The canoe touched the bank, and the two men leaped out. They came quickly toward the Racer.

Frank sprang down to meet them. They gripped hands, and Bent said:

"I'm Bill Bent, an' this ar' is my pard Jack Dale, or Pecos Jack, as the boys calls him."

"I'm glad to meet you, gentlemen," said Frank, warmly. "I had hardly expected to find a white man in this region."

"Ugh!" ejaculated Bent; "yew won't find many of 'em. But we're here for a purpose."

"Ah!" said Frank. "The lost caravan, is it?"

"Jest so."

"But—what caravan, and how did it get lost? At least explain it to me."

"That I will, friend," said Bent, "but it's quite a story, an' I'll have to begin at ther beginning."

"First come on board the Racer," said Frank, "then I can explain my business in this region, and we will mutually confer."

"Good," agreed Bent; "that's what I like to hear!"

The two plainsmen went aboard the machine. Frank showed them over it, and explained its mechanism as well as he could.

They were astonished as well as delighted.

"Wall, I'll be doggoned," exclaimed Bent, "this air beats anythin' I ever seen afore. Yew needn't be much afraid of the Apaches with this, I reckon!"

"No," replied Frank; "we could whip the whole nation of them in open battle."

They were now seated in the cabin, and Frank passed around cigars. Then Bent told his story.

It was a thrilling narrative.

"Yew air travellin' in this kentry fer pleasure an' excitement," he said, "but we air tryin' to resky a lot of people who, if they ain't already dead, must be in terrible hard fix."

"Eleven months ago a caravan left Dallas for Fort Sumner on the Pecos. There war ten families, men, women and children in that caravan, and about fifty people all told."

"But out of thet fifty there warn't more nor fifteen fightin' men. Jeff Haines was ther pilot an' lots of people told him better nor to try to cross ther Llano without military escort, fer ther Apaches were on ther rampage."

"But old Jeff 'lowed that he warn't afraid of ther red devils, and so ther caravan set out, horses and waggins an' mules an' all. They hev bin eleven months missin'. They hain't reached Fort Sumner yit an' in course suthin' is wrong."

"They may be dead and scalped, but a good many fancied they war shut in some way and were held besieged by ther Apaches. We hev found traces of 'em in different places. Thet's what we're in this ere region fer. We ain't hed much luck so far."

CHAPTER IV.

DOWN THE RIVER.

"But," continued Bent, "we hope tew hev better fortin' yet. We belong in Tascos, but organized thar an' cum down yere tew try an' find them helpless wimmen an' children. We've lost more'n half our men, but we ain't goin' back till we find 'em. Thet's ther whole of ther story."

Frank Reade, Jr., was intensely excited. He arose and paced the floor.

"I am glad I have run across you," he said, "and I am interested in your heroic project. I shall give you all the aid in my power. I agree with you that the caravan is probably besieged somewhere by the Apaches. We must track them down. The rest will be easy."

"Yew are a man arter my own heart!" roared Bent. "Durn me, but thet's ther kind of talk I like! With yer help we'll do it!"

"We will try," agreed Frank; "but have you any clew?"

"I hev hed a hundred!" replied Bent, "but none on 'em has worked. Thar's jest one way an' that is to foller ther trail as nearly as possible."

"True," agreed Frank, "if that is not now obliterated. Where did you last find it fresh?"

"Twenty miles above here on the banks of this very river. We reckoned as haow Jeff had been driven outer an island in the middle of ther stream. We found all signs of a hot fight. We also found stumps and shavings and cut branches which appeared as if they hed made a raft like ours an' hed floated down ther stream jest as we are doing."

"No doubt of it," agreed Frank. "And you did the same?"

"Jes' so! We made thet raft yender in two days, and reckoned to drift down arter ther caravan and stop wherever it had stopped."

"But did they not have horses and wagons?" asked Frank.

"We found some on ther waggins in kindlin' wood. Ther hosses cud easy go along on ther raft, yer know."

"What do you think their purpose was in taking to the river?"

"Wall, I make out that Jeff thought it tew hot work travellin' acrost ther plain with waggins an' horses. On ther raft they cud keep ther reds at a distance. Then he probably elected tew drift down into ther Pecos, an' probably fall in with help or make the west bank and strike out again fer Sumner."

Frank saw that the theories of Bent were all logical and no doubt correct. The lost caravan must then have been wiped out of existence between this spot and the west bank of the Pecos, or be somewhere between these points besieged.

In either case the affair presented a wide scope for exciting adventure, and this was what the young inventor was looking for.

So he was at once interested and determined to join in the quest for the caravan. But he said:

"I cannot understand why you should be so rash as to venture into this dangerous region with so few men, my friend Bent."

The cowboy showed his even white teeth in a smile.

"We didn't stop tew count noses," he declared. "We took all the volunteers we cud find an' set out. We hev hed great losses, but even ten of us would be a good reinforcement."

"That is true," agreed Frank, "but why not have sent a courier to Stockton or Sumner for military aid?"

Bent opened his eyes wide.

"E pluribus unum!" he quoted. "One man or two could hardly have made the journey."

"Is that so?"

"Yew bet!"

"Well—then your plan is to continue down the river?"

"Sartin! that's what Haines did. We kin find out whar he went ashore if he did sich a thing, or we'll find some proof thet ther reds scalped ther hull party."

"Very good!" said Frank, inclining his head; "your plan looks like a logical one. We will follow it. Let us hope that we will find them besieged somewhere beyond here."

"Wall, if that's the case, I reckon it'll be somewhar in the Table Hills, fer this river runs right through them. Thet's about fifty miles below here!"

"Good! then you will raise anchor and continue down the stream on board your raft?"

"Thet looks like ther best plan."

"No doubt it is. The Racer will follow you along the bank. How many miles a day can your raft travel?"

"About twenty, I reckon."

"We will be nearly three days getting there, then?"

"So it looks, friend!"

This ended the interview. Bent was delighted with having secured Frank's co-operation, and looked forward with much encouragement to the future.

Bent and Jack Dale returned to the raft where they told their eight companions of the new stroke of luck. So delighted were they, that they mounted the parapet of the raft and cheered lustily.

Frank and Barney and Pomp answered this with a will. Then the raft cast off its moorings and the start was made.

The Racer followed the banks of the river as closely as possible. It was necessary to go slowly, as the raft moved slow.

Thus they proceeded for miles. Thus far the river had made its way through a green plain.

But now a belt of timber and a dense chaparral come into view. Frank regarded this with some concern.

It was a possible obstruction. If its undergrowth was too dense the Racer might have to go out around it. How much of a detour this would make was a question.

This would mean a temporary separation of the machine and the raft. But just as Frank was puzzled the most to know what to do, Barney cried:

"Shure, Misther Frank, wud yez take a luk at the raft. There's somethin' the matter wid 'em!"

Frank instantly glanced in that direction. He was surprised to see that the raft had come to a stop, and one of the party was waving a white flag tied to a stick.

"That's queer," muttered the young inventor. "What can be the matter?"

The machine came to a stop and Frank ran down the bank to the water's edge. Then he shouted:

"What's the matter, Bent?"
 "I jest thought I'd ax ye how ye could git through that ere timber belt? It looks pooty thick."
 "I hardly know," replied Frank. "I thought of going around it."
 "Won't it be a pooty long trip?"
 "Well, rather."
 "Mebbe suthin' might happen we cudn't git together agin."
 "I thought of that."
 "Wall, I've got an ijee."
 "Well?" asked Frank.
 "S'posin' yew jest run yure waggin aboard this raft. It'll float it easy. Then when we cum to open kentry you kin go ashore again."
 "That is an excellent plan," agreed Frank, "if the raft will surely float us."
 "I'll take my oath on that."
 "Then it is agreed. Can you wear the raft around to this shore?"
 "Jest as easy. We hev got some spare logs fer skids tew, so we kin slide the waggin right down from the bank."

Frank was at once favorably impressed with this plan. He saw that the raft was so large and so staple an affair that it could easily bear up the weight of the Racer. Moreover, this would unite the party.

So the Racer was quickly run down to the bank. The raft touched the sands, and the stout plainsmen very quickly had run out some huge logs from the raft to the bank, making in reality serviceable skids, down which the machine could be slid safely.

Then all the plainsmen came ashore. The cable which Frank produced, was tied about the rear part of the Racer, and then the line of men bore upon it and gradually lowered the machine to the raft.

Great cheers went up as this was safely accomplished. Then all went aboard and the raft cast away from the shore.

Down into the current it floated. It was now more than ever a floating fortress.

And our adventurers had a most excellent chance to get well acquainted with their new-made acquaintances. They found them to be rough but honest and fearless men.

Barney and Pomp were right in their element now.

They quickly fraternized with the frontiersmen, and all were soon the best of friends.

The comicalities of the negro and the Irishman kept the plainsmen in a constant state of good humor.

Down the river the raft now drifted.

Soon naught but the forest was upon either hand. It could be seen that the Racer could never have penetrated its tangled depths.

For hours the raft drifted on thus.

Then suddenly Bent approached Frank and said:

"Do you hear a peculiar sound jest ahead of us, Mister Reader?"

Frank listened, then gave a start.

"On my word!" he exclaimed; "that sounds like rushing waters."

"Rapids?"

"Yes."

The two men looked at each other questioningly. For a moment neither spoke.

Thus far the river had presented only a sluggish current and easily navigable. Now, however, a real danger began to loom up before them.

Frank glanced at the shore. It was by no means an encouraging landing place for the Racer. Yet what was to be done?

It would certainly never do to risk a breaking up of the raft in the rapids unless they were of the kind down which the raft could safely pass. The only way to make sure of this was to anchor the raft here and then go on ahead and ascertain the facts in the case.

Frank broached this to Bent. The latter agreed that it was right, so at once orders were given for the mooring of the raft.

The roar of the rapids could now be quite plainly heard. The canoes were brought out and a party of six made up to go ahead and reconnoiter. Bill Bent shook his head.

"I'm afraid we are going ter meet with diffikilty now," he cried, "if we hev tew leave ther raft an' take to thet chaparral there'll be hard work afore us afore we reach ther Table Hills!"

Frank heartily agreed with the cowboy. But yet he hoped for the best.

CHAPTER V.

SURROUNDED BY SAVAGES.

THOSE selected for the expedition were Frank and Barney, Bill Bent and Jack Dale and two of the plainsmen.

These were in two canoes, Frank, Barney and Bent in one of them.

Leaving the raft they paddled away down the stream. They were soon beyond a bend in the river.

Here the current grew momentarily swifter. Then there suddenly burst into view a distant cloud of mist.

Bent gave a prolonged whistle.

"Whew!" he exclaimed; "it's lucky for us that we didn't make out tew try an' run them rapids. We'd been in a high old scrape right away."

"That is true," agreed Frank. "Need we go further? Judging from the roar of those falls we can not hope to pass them."

"Wall, ye never kin tell," ventured Bent. "We mought investigate."

So the canoes went on.

Soon they were right in full sight of the rapids. And now a singular scene was presented.

The river here seemed to divide into two branches. One went dashing and roaring down over a rocky bed.

The other on the contrary flowed away at another angle with swift current, but no rapids. Into this branch of the river the canoes, passed.

"Wall, thet beats me!" cried Bent, in surprise, "dew yew reckon this river meets t'other agin?"

"Yes," declared Frank, with conviction. "I think you will find it so. But to make sure, suppose some of us go ashore and climb the tallest tree hereabouts. Barney, you are a good monkey!"

"Bejabers, I'm the man fer yez, Misther Frank," cried the Celt; "be shure, sor, I'll undhertake it."

"Then yew air the huckleberry fer us," cried Bent. "We'll try thet high cottonwood yender. Kin ye go thet?"

"Shure an' I kin!"

The canoe ran up to the shore and Barney sprang out. Dale and his men now came up.

Barney quickly ascended into the cottonwood. In a very few moments, with agility, he had reached the highest branch. From this elevation he had a sweeping view of the river in either direction.

The Celt used his eyes for all they were worth.

He saw the two branches of the river in their full course. That to the north ran rapidly for some miles over rough stony bottom. Then it came out into an open plain and bore in a crescent course around to the south.

Here it joined the southern branch which in all its course was unbroken by rapids. The main river thus flowed away to the base of a distant range of flat topped hills.

That these were the Table Mountains for which they were bound, the Celt felt sure. All this he noted and more.

The island thus made was in the most part densely wooded and rocky in the remaining part.

Studying this panorama for some while the Celt next turned his gaze to the east. He saw the winding course of the river and the raft moored a few miles above.

Then he caught sight of something else which made his hair creep. Between them and the raft and gently gliding along in the cover of the shore, were half a dozen large canoes.

They contained each half a dozen dusky Apaches, a war-party. That they were creeping down the river to surprise and attack the two canoes of white men there was no doubt.

This was a peril real and enormous.

Thirty-six armed Apaches between them and the raft. What could the six plainsmen hope to do in the face of such odds?

"Be me sowl!" gasped Barney. "Misther Frank must know av that right away!"

He lost no time but slid quickly down the cottonwood. He scrambled down the bank with white face and agitated manner.

"What is the matter, Barney?" asked Frank in surprise. "What has gone wrong now?"

"Shure, sor, they're afther us!" gasped the Irishman. "We must be afther gettin' away from here."

With which he told the story. It is needless to say that quick action was made.

The two canoes were quickly run ashore. They were dragged into the bushes, and the white men crouched down to wait.

Their game was, of course, to allow the pursuing savages to pass, and then launch their canoes again and make for the raft. This would be giving the foe the slip in good fashion.

But, alas, for best laid plans!

As they crouched there in the jungle, suddenly a peculiar note of a bird was heard far up the river.

"They're comin'," whispered Bent; "I know that cry. It's an Apache call!"

Several times the cry of the river hen was heard. Then it was repeated from another quarter, and so astounded our adventurers, that for a moment they were in dire confusion.

The answer to the water hen's call, came from the forest in their rear. It instantly established one terrible fact.

They were pursued on land as well as on the river. Moreover, the red foe were all about them.

"Surrounded," gasped Bent. "I'll be lassoed if thet ain't hard lines!"

"Begorra, we've got to foight fer our loives! If we only had the electric gun here now——"

"We might try the other side of the river," suggested Frank.

But Bent shook his head.

"No use," he said; "they're over thar too. Don't ye hear 'em?"

Surrounded by the Apaches. Truly it was a hard outlook.

What was to be done?

For some moments our adventurers were in a dire predicament.

But Jack Dale now came to the rescue.

"We mought try an' beat 'em in ther bush," he said. "We'll hev to leave our canoes to do it."

"Anything!" exclaimed Frank; "this is no time for choice! Name your plan, Mr. Dale!"

"Wall, come with me," said the Texan, who was an expert Indian strategist.

He started at once along the river bank. But Bent exclaimed:

"That's walkin' right inter 'em, Jack."

"All right," said the Texan, laconically; "in course that's so. But we must slip 'em ye see. They'll be looking fer us on the river in—"

stead of ther shore. Thet will help us an' if we work through their line we kin git beyond 'em an' have a clear course fer the raft. See?"

"I see," agreed Bent; "but won't they stumble right onto us, pard?"

"We must keep our eyes open don't ye see?" averred Jack; "git under ther grass like a snake, or up a tree like a coon. Keep outen their sight, thet's all."

Both Frank and Bent felt very doubtful of their ability to do this.

"If all of us had as good a knowledge of wood-craft as you, Mr. Dale," said Frank, "we could be pretty sure to do it!"

"Jest do as ye see me do!"

"Well," agreed Frank, "it is our only chance. If we are discovered, we must fight, that is all."

So it was decided.

But first Jack Dale or Pecos Jack gave them all instructions how to hide from the gaze of the prowling savages. He caused the party to separate a little.

Then, secreted under the thicket, all waited for the critical passing of the line of foes.

Suddenly the Apache signal sounded close by Frank. He gave an involuntary start and gripped his rifle.

"Sh! don't ye know better nor that?" came the warning whisper from Jack Dale; "keep dead quiet, pard!"

"But I heard one of them right beside me," whispered Frank, in reply.

"Thet was me."

"You?"

"Yas!"

"But won't that bring them down onto us?"

Dale chuckled in reply.

"If they hear an Injun over here giving a signal, they'll never think of looking fer us here," he declared; "they'll jest go out around us!"

Frank could say no more. He saw that Dale was a past master in the art of wood-craft.

Soon the chatter of the squirrel, or the shriek of the wood-hawk and other signals were all about the hiding white men.

Jack Dale kept up his one note of the water hen, and so skillfully did he practice the deception that the advancing line of skulking savages actually passed by without discovering their quarry.

All in the party felt like giving the shrewd woodsman an embrace. But he made quick signals to follow him, and away they glided through the forest.

This was by no means an easy feat, for it was necessary to proceed with the utmost silence.

The creaking of a twig, an unwary crash in the underbrush might bring the red foe all about them again.

But fortunately the white men made no mistake. Soon Dale burst out from a tangled mess of vines and pointed to the river before them.

"There's the raft, pards," he cried. "I reckon we fooled ther reds this time."

"Thanks to your excellent strategy," declared Frank, "it is likely that we owe our lives to you."

Dale modestly disclaimed this assumption, however, and they went on down to the water's edge.

The first object visible was Pomp's woolly head above the parapet. He gave a loud whoop of joy at sight of his companions safe and sound.

Then a canoe put out from the raft and took them off the shore. General explanations followed once they were aboard the raft.

"Golly fo' glory! I'se done glad yo' has come back agin fo' suah!" cried Pomp. "Wha' dis nigger eber do if yo' had been all scalped by dem Injuns?"

"Bejabers, yez would have had everything to yeself thin, naygur!" cried Barney, throwing a flip-flop. "Small nade there'd be fer the loikes av yez to kick. Shure, wudn't yez have the Racer?"

"Huh! don' care nuffin 'bout dat. 'S'pose I want dis Racer wifout Marse Frank to boss it. Dis chile ain' no fool. Yo' cudn't git along wifout Marse Frank no moah dan I cud."

Everybody laughed at this, and Bent cried.

"By bufflers, Mister Reade, them two chaps are pooty much attached to you, ain't they?"

Frank smiled and looked pleased.

"We are old friends," he said. "It is a tie not easily broken. Where I go Barney and Pomp go too."

"An' ye're a combination hard tew beat," declared Bent, whereat the others gave a shout of assent.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE RIVER FORKS.

It was easy to see that our adventurers were popular with the plainsmen. The best of feeling prevailed, which was a very good thing.

Then a consultation was held.

Of course but one conclusion was reached. This was that the party should keep on down the river on the raft.

"I do not fear any attack they can make," declared Frank, "not so long as we have the electric gun."

"Then ye think it'll be safe to run right on down ther south branch of ther river?" asked Bent.

"Why not?"

"Wall, I reckon 'tis. Haul up anchor, boys, an' give way at ther sweeps."

Once more the big raft was under way. Down the river it drifted and every moment nearer the booming rapids.

And now a possible peril suggested itself to Bent.

"Do yew s'pose ther current kin be powerful enuff tew draw us off inter them rapids?" he asked Frank. "If it is our goose is cooked."

"We must guard against that," said Frank. "If necessary we can send ropes ashore, and wear our way down on this side until below the angle."

"Right, friend," agreed Bent, "but them ar Injuns——"

"Don't worry about them," said Frank, confidently. "I think I can make matters pretty sickly for them hereabouts; just leave that to me."

"All right, cap'en," agreed Bent, but it was plain that the cowboys were none of them so confident as Frank was.

On drifted the raft.

Suddenly it turned the bend and came in easy view of the rapids. Then an unexpected thing happened.

The cracking of rifles came from the forest on both sides of the river, and bullets went singing over the parapet, or sunk into the logs with a thud. One of the sweepmen was slightly wounded.

Instantly a commotion was created. This kind of an attack was totally unlike the Apache style of warfare.

But it was likely that they had discovered the imposition practiced upon them by the whites, and were too enraged to control themselves. Nothing could have suited the raftsmen better than this betrayal of their presence.

"Oho!" cried Bent, jeeringly, "they are awful mad, ain't they? So they're goin' to show an open hand right away? Durn their measly hides, that's jest what we want! Heigho!"

This latter exclamation was caused by an unexpected sight. Dale was the first man to see it.

"Look!" he cried, "they mean to get us into trouble if they kin."

All beheld the cause of this remark. Across the southern branch of the river there was stretched a couple of strong lariats strongly intertwined.

It would seem as if the weight of the raft should snap them like a tow string. But to one familiar with the tenacity and strength of the rawhide lariat, it was at once easy to see that the barrier was no despicable one.

It would have seemed easy to cut it, but a man must expose himself on the end of the raft to do this. That deadly rifleman lurked in the forest recesses on either side was certain. This would mean certain death.

Moreover, it now looked likely that the lariats were not needed to consummate the ruin of the raft, for it was slowly swinging of its own volition toward the rapids.

The sweepmen were working like heroes. But the raft was barely holding its own.

Bent was pale and nervous.

"By wildcats! I'm afraid we're done for, Mr. Reade!" he said; "what dew yew think of it?"

Frank's keen gaze had been taking in the situation. He saw that the time had come for decisive action.

So he sprang aboard the Racer. He mounted to the upper deck and put a dynamite shell into the pneumatic gun.

It was but a moment's work to train it. He aimed for the clump of trees at one end of the lariat. Then he pulled the lever.

There was a slight recoil, and the hiss of air.

The shell struck where it was aimed. The next moment the vicinity looked as if a cyclone had struck it.

There was an awful roar. An earthquake shock and a terrific upheaval of trees, stones and earth. The lariat snapped like thread.

Quick as a flash Frank sent another shell to the opposite shore. He followed this with others into the nearby woods.

Fearful whoops and yells came from the forest depths. Then they ceased. Nothing human could stand in the face of such a fire.

Frank now rushed to the rail of the Racer.

"Lively now, all of you," he cried, "take a rope ashore and turn it around that big cottonwood on the point. Don't be afraid of Apaches. You won't find one in a radius of miles!"

The astounded plainsmen for a moment were unable to act. It was Bent who gave them their first inspiration.

"Come on," he cried, springing into the canoe, "the quicker we go the better."

Four men were quickly on their way to the shore with the rope. They were none too soon.

As it was carried around the big cottonwood the bow of the raft came slowly around. Another rope was carried to the angle of the two rivers, and slowly the big raft swung into the smooth river.

The danger was over.

The raft was saved.

And all was owing to Frank Reade, Jr., and the electric gun. On down the river went the rescuing party once more in quest of the lost caravan.

But all these incidents which we have described had consumed much time, and darkness was rapidly coming on.

What had become of the Apaches it was not easy to guess. But after such a repulse it seemed as if they would be wise in keeping a safe distance.

Rapidly night came on. Guards were stationed at all ends of the raft. The search-light made a pathway of light down the river.

And now that the perils of the day were over, the spirits of all were gay and a jolly time ensued.

Barney and Pomp added their quota to the little fund of entertain-

ment. Aboard the Racer they sprung and each appeared, one with a banjo and the other with a fiddle.

Pomp twanged away at a plantation breakdown and then sang a darky song. Barney gave Garry Owen on the fiddle and sang an Irish ballad.

Altogether it was a joyous evening aboard the raft and none turned in until quite a late hour.

As good fortune had it no incident marred the repose of those on the raft that night. Morning came full and fair and all were astir at an early hour.

During the night the raft had drifted clear of the forest and the open plain was again upon either hand.

While in the distance the Table Hills were to be descried.

Suddenly as they were making a bend in the river Bent caught sight of something on shore. As he did so he gave a little gasp.

"Look!" he exclaimed; "durned if they didn't break up their raft here!"

And so indeed it looked.

For, piled up on the shore was a heap of logs and debris. There were also remains of an old wagon.

That the caravan might have met its final fate here looked, indeed, logical. Bent gave orders to moor the raft.

Then the canoe was put out, and Frank with Bent and Dale paddled ashore.

One fact at least was established. They were upon the track of the lost caravan if it yet existed.

Approaching the heap of debris the three men first beheld a ghastly sight. There in the sands of the bluff lay a number of bleaching skeletons.

For aught they knew these might be the remains of the sole survivors of the ill-fated expedition.

Bent made a close examination of them, and said:

"They air white men's bones, I reckon. No Injun has a skull shaped like thet."

The others agreed with Bent. Then the debris was given an overhauling. This resulted in one conclusion.

It was logical that the raft had at this point moored for the night, and a section of it was cut off and left here. Also the dilapidated wagon, from which the Indians had taken every vestige of iron.

But the large part of the raft and the survivors of the party had continued on down the river. They had arrived at this conclusion when Jack Dale made a discovery.

He picked up the tail board of the wagon. Upon this was an entry in blue chalk. Thus it read:

"We are in camp once more after twenty miles drifting to-day. Jeff thinks we ought to reach the hills to-morrow. One of our men reports Indian signs. We are to post extra guards to-night. God help us if we are attacked for ours is a feeble band and these accursed Apaches follow us like a plague. It will be a happy day for us when we make the west bank of the Pecos. There we hope to find relief from the fort. I am to relieve the guard at two o'clock. Memo. of Dick Clare."

Bent was much excited when he read this.

"I know the lad well," he declared; "he was a brave youth and one of a bright family. Jasper Clare, his father, is one of the best ranchmen in ther hull west."

"It was evidently the guard that were killed," said Frank, slowly; "do you think the writer of this was one of them?"

Bill Bent shook his head.

"Those are bones of men well matured," he said. "I reckon the lad escaped. Then ther Injuns probably struck their blow afore mid-night."

These discoveries were of course of no slight importance to the rescue party. It offered a ray of hope.

"It'll depend on what we find next, pards," declared Jack Dale. "Mebbe the rest of 'em are tied up in ther hills."

"Then we're galoots tew be loafin' here," cried Bent; "they may be deadly in need of us this ere minnit!"

"You are right," agreed Frank, "let us press on as quickly as possible."

Back to the raft they went.

Once more the moorings were cast off and the raft was propelled down the stream. The men worked vigorously at the long sweep.

Midnight was covered. At last they were close to the Table Hills. The river ran into a canyon here and the raft came again to a stop to decide what was the best move to make. Exciting events were in store.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FUGITIVE.

THE deadly fear of the Apaches, which had been the bugbear of the plainsmen until now, was quite dispelled, now that they had secured the co-operation of Frank Reade, Jr.

It seemed as if the electric gun and the Racer were a safeguard against all peril.

It restored the courage of the rescue party, and they were ready for anything.

To enter the hills by means of the canyon or on foot was the question. Frank had decided for himself.

Once in the canyon, it would be hard to turn back. They might encounter rapids or a cascade.

So Frank decided to unload the Racer at this point.

The raft was drawn up to the shore and moored. Then a platform or gangway of logs was quickly laid up on the bank.

Up this the Racer was once more landed, and stood again on terra firma.

Then a confab was held.

The result was that Bent decided to land his men here and follow the lead of Frank Reade, Jr., into the hills.

What was more the discovery of marks of a former landing was made. Dale declared:

"I honestly reckon thet ther caravan people came ashore at this p'int. We kain't do better than tew foller 'em."

"Ye're right, Jack," agreed Bent.

So the raft was abandoned. Armed to the teeth the ten plainsmen were ready for the invasion of the Table Hills.

As the Racer could not have carried them it was useless for them to do aught but follow the machine on foot. So they set forth.

In all the southwest the Table Hills had not a parallel.

Too high to be distinguished as table-lands or plateaus, they were yet of the same character. After having ascended their precipitous sides the summit was found to be as flat as any prairie or bottom land and covering many square miles in extent.

Each of these singular hills was thus flat at the summit. Between the hills were terrible ravines, canyons and gorges. But yet from each to the other there was always to be found a narrow causeway, as if designed by nature for communication.

So that on the summit of the Table Hills fully a hundred square miles could be traveled on a level surface.

The toilsome ascent was begun. The machine experienced some little difficulty, so rough was the steep.

But in due course all had made the climb safely, and were upon the summit of the Table Hills.

There were vistas of level green plain, dotted with chaparral, visible as far as the eye could reach. Over this the party made their way.

It was assumed that the caravan party would endeavor to follow the river to its junction with the Pecos many miles beyond. So the rescue party decided upon the same move.

The canyon was found, and along its verge the party made its way. For some days no incident of any kind occurred.

Neither was any trail or trace of the lost settlers to be gained. However, Bent kept on.

"In course they followed this ere way," he said, with conviction, "they hadn't any better thing tew dew. Thunder an' grizzlies! what was thet?"

A terrible long drawn wail of agony went up on the air. It came from a copse not far distant. There was no mistaking the fact that it was a human voice.

Instantly several of the plainsmen, headed by Bent, had started for the spot. But they halted.

Out from the undergrowth sprang a tall, slender figure of a man. In one hand he held a long, keen-bladed knife. It was dripping with blood.

At the same moment three other forms were seen skirting the copse to head him off. They were armed with rifles and were Apaches.

Another moment and the fugitive youth would have come in a line with their vision, and might have been shot dead.

But in that instant Bent threw up his rifle as did two others.

Crack-ack!

Two of the savages threw up their arms with wild yells and fell. The other vanished.

The fugitive youth turned in amazement. At sight of the Racer and the plainsmen he gave a cry of joy and came bounding towards them.

His appearance was pitiable.

Some terrible hardship had reduced his clothing to a few ragged segments. His hair fell low over his shoulders, and his face was bruised and swollen.

"Thank God!" he cried, in a quivering voice, as he came bounding up. "I once more meet those of my own race. For months past I have done naught but lead a hunted existence, pursued, trailed and almost run down by those fiends of Apaches!"

"You are welcome!" cried Frank. "Your looks bear out your words. Was it your voice we heard in yonder copse?"

"No," replied the rescued youth, "that was the death cry of an Apache. We had a terrible battle, but I triumphed, and plunged this knife into his heart. But for you, though, I must have soon paid for it."

"Yas!" cried Bent, "they war close onto ye. But haow in time did yew git inter sich a fix, an' whar ar ye from?"

This was the question upon the lips of all. The youth saw it and hastened to relieve their curiosity.

"It is a long story," he began. "Our party, in which were a number of families of settlers, bound for Fort Sumner on the Pecos, fell in with Apaches before they had got well into the wilderness, and we were badly riddled. Jeff Haines, our trusty leader—"

"Hooray!" shouted Bill Bent. "Air yew one of ther lost caravan thet Bill Haines left Dallas with?"

"I am," replied the youth, in surprise. "You have heard of us then?"

"In course we hev. Why, lad, we're here tew resky ye an' carry ye on safely tew Fort Sumner. Whar's the rest of yer party?"

The youth's face lengthened.

"Oh, I cannot tell you," he said; "I have searched for them in

vain. They were securely fortified in a little pocket in these hills. I went out upon a hunt for venison. When I returned they were gone. I have not seen them since."

This declaration created a sensation.

"How long ago wuz that?" asked Bill.

"Fully a month."

"An' yew've bin huntin' fer 'em ever since then?"

"I have."

"Wall, was there any reason for their taking sich French leave? War they attacked by ther reds?"

"There were marks of a desperate fight. Yet I found no dead bodies. Doubtless my friends are somewhere in these hills, but I cannot seem to get track of them."

This was a remarkable story. Bent and Dale exchanged glances. Then the latter asked:

"Could they hev taken yure people off as prisoners?"

"The Apaches don't do that," replied the youth.

"Right," agreed the Indian fighter; "but it's curus whar they went. How many were in ther party when yew left?"

"Perhaps eighteen. Not more than eight of them were men able to fight."

"Whew! is thet all that's left of ther caravan?"

"It is, sir."

"One moment," said Frank Reade, Jr., pressing forward; "what is your name, young man?"

"Dick Clare!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the young inventor, "I guessed as much. We read a bit of memorandum written by you on the tailboard of a wagon—"

"Yes," cried Dick Clare, eagerly, "that was where we lost three of our best men. It was a midnight attack."

Then young Clare proceeded to give in detail the course and the fearful experiences of the caravan in its long career across the Llano. He was listened to with interest.

When he had finished, Frank called to Pomp:

"Hey, you black rascal, get this gentleman something good to eat."

"A'right, sah!" replied Pomp, as he vanished.

"I will find you a new suit of clothes, Mr. Clare," Frank continued.

"You seem sorely in need of it."

Tears stood in young Clare's eyes.

"You are more than kind," he said, huskily. "I trust you will get your reward. But, oh, I wish I knew where my companions are today."

"We will find them, if possible," said Frank, earnestly.

Young Clare was astonished when he went on board the Racer and noted its character and its fittings.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "it is a palace on wheels. And run by electricity too. Well, I never!"

Clare felt much better when he had finished his meal, and he soon appeared in some new clothes, thanks to Frank's philanthropy.

Then with high spirits he was all in for the finding of the other members of the caravan.

"With your help I shall find them!" he cried. "I was before in constant fear of the Apaches!"

"Then these hills are filled with the dusky barbarians, are they?" asked Frank.

"They are everywhere!" declared Clare. "You can hardly step in the grass without putting your foot on one!"

"We shall be glad to step on a few," said Frank, ironically. "I think we can give them a scare!"

As it now was a certainty that they were in the very nest of the Apaches, all hands were on the alert.

Every move was made with caution and judgment. Slowly the party moved forward.

The Racer went ahead, and into every suspicious thicket or covert a few rifle shots were thrown. The plainsmen came on behind and prepared for a hot fight at any moment.

But the Apache is the shrewdest strategist in the world.

It was hardly likely that they would show themselves. And it is when the Apache makes himself invisible that he is most to be dreaded.

It may be well reckoned upon that he is close at hand and meditating some treacherous game. None knew this better than Jack Dale.

He deployed his men right and left, and compelled them to keep constantly in cover. And in this manner the invasion of the Table Hills was made.

But where was the remnant of the lost caravan? What was their fate?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MIDNIGHT ATTACK.

FRANK READE, JR., would have given much to have been able to answer this question. But he believed that the solution was not far distant.

For an hour the invading party crept forward.

Not an Apache sign was seen.

Then night began to settle down again. It became necessary to camp.

Jack Dale's face was grim.

Under cover of darkness he knew well that the savages would endeavor to make an aggressive move. It was well to be prepared.

So he called an early halt. Then preparations were made for making the camp secure.

The party rested upon a little rise of ground. The machine was upon one side as a means of screen, and a ledge of rock upon the other. In a hollow of this a camp fire was built.

Then the search-light was kept constantly at work scanning the intervening plain to a clump of trees distant not a half mile, and which would afford presumably the best cover for the redmen.

Guards were also posted, and thus fortified, the invading party felt a trifle safer. Yet there was danger.

A deer had been shot during the march, and the venison was roasted over the camp fire. But Pomp managed to also furnish a few additions to the general bill of fare.

Perhaps the happiest member of the party was Dick Clare.

He told his story to Frank, who had at once made friends with the youth. There was quite a little romance connected thereby.

In the caravan party there was a family named Lewis.

They were from the far east, and the family consisted of Horace Lewis and his wife, and a daughter of seventeen, Eva Lewis.

As eulogistically described by Dick, Eva Lewis was one of the most beautiful and charming of young girls. It was plain that the young man was heels over ears in love with her, and that his love was reciprocated.

"If any harm comes to her!" said Dick, with set teeth and flashing eyes, "woe to the Apache nation! I will consecrate my life to exterminating the deadly vipers."

"We will hope that all of your party are safe somewhere in this region," said Frank. "And we will rescue them."

"Heaven aid us to do that!"

The night was a black one. Dark clouds banked in the heavens and obliterated the light of moon and stars.

A southing south wind went wailing across the plain and rustled the tall grasses and the leaves of the trees and sung in the tangled spires of the spiny cactus.

It was an ideal night for an Indian attack. The wind favored the red foe, and the darkness was their boon.

The white guards were constantly upon the alert.

The search lamp sent its white light in every direction across the plain. But it could not penetrate to the roots of the waving grasses.

There, for aught they knew, hundreds of skulking savages might be snake-like making their way to the camp ready at a signal to leap to the attack.

All in the party were extremely tired, and most of them retired early to rest.

But Frank Reade, Jr., and young Clare were not inclined to sleep. They wandered outside the circle of the camp, and in the shadow of the ledge they sat down upon a bowlder, straining their gaze into the darkness.

For Frank felt intuitively that they would be attacked that night.

Young Clare seemed to have taken a great fancy to Frank. He hung about him persistently.

They conversed in a low tone.

"What dreadful foes these Apaches are," declared the young settler. "This region will never be open for settlement so long as they infest it."

"I quite agree with you," said Frank. "Yet the evil is one not easily cured."

"I should think Uncle Sam, with all his mighty resources, might remedy it."

"How?"

"By sending troops out here and giving the red wretches a whipping."

"Ah," said Frank, shaking his head, "that is considered an extreme measure. It would be condemned in the East, where popular sentiment favors the poor Indian. It would be deemed a massacre—or at least, oppression in favor of the grasping Western land grabber."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Clare, impatiently. "Some of them ought to come out here and take a look at the matter just as it is. Then they might not have quite so much to say."

"I quite agree with you."

The words had barely left Frank's lips, when young Clare put a hand on his arm. He was trembling like an aspen.

"Look," he whispered; "did you see that?"

"What?" asked Frank.

"That Indian! I'll take my oath he stood at full height out yonder in the grass a moment ago. He has vanished now!"

Frank was much excited.

"Are you sure of that?" he asked.

"As sure as that I am alive at this moment."

"He must have been venturesome."

"Ah, he stood up to get a look in at the camp, but he did not expose himself for long."

"That is very true. Then there must be others out there. No doubt the grass is alive with them."

"I believe it, and they are only waiting a weak moment to dash in upon us."

Frank set his lips.

"Then we must be prepared," he muttered. "If I was sure they were out there I'd make it hot for them with the electric gun."

The young inventor was about to turn and reenter the camp, when an unlooked-for thing happened.

Again Dick Clare gave a smothered cry. Then Frank saw in that instant the cause of it.

Afar off in the direction of the north part of the Table Hills there suddenly sprang into view a fierce red glow. It mounted up into the air and shone brightly against the sky.

The two men gazed intently at it a moment.

Then Frank exclaimed:

"A fire!"

"Yes!" agreed Clare, "is it a signal?"

Both knew that this was a favorite Apache trick, and that oftentimes hundreds of signal fires would be burning in different parts of the hills.

But a closer scrutiny convinced Frank that this hypothesis was wrong.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed, "that is not a signal fire!"

"So!" exclaimed Clare, in surprise, "what then is it?"

"Look! It is too fierce and bright. See how it burns with a volume equal to a volcano. Ah, did I not tell you? Listen!"

Plainly to the hearing of both came faint yells and the barely audible crack of rifles.

For a moment both Frank and Clare were spell-bound. They hardly knew how to act, or what to do.

Then Frank recovered himself.

"Do you know what that means?" he exclaimed; "as I live I believe that is an attack upon the lost caravan!"

Clare's face was ashen pale.

"It is," he gasped. "I know it. They will murder them, every one. Oh, for the love of heaven, let us to the rescue!"

In that moment Frank saw but one path of duty. This was to fly to the rescue of the besieged people.

He clasped Clare's hand and turned back into the camp. The distant conflict could not be more than two miles away.

It would take but a scant while for the machine to run that distance.

With the electric gun he could scatter the savages like chaff, and Bent and his men could hold the fort where they were or follow slowly on as they might choose.

This was the instant plan which flashed through Frank's brain. He had time to say to Clare:

"Don't fear! We will save them!"

Then a thrilling incident occurred.

From the ground almost at their feet a lithe form sprang up. No panther was quicker in an attack.

Straight at Frank Reade, Jr., it sprang. A deadly tomahawk flashed in the night air.

That moment would have been Frank Reade, Jr.'s, last but for the quick action of Dick Clare.

Swift as the attack was the defense. Clare leaped forward like a cat and caught the uplifted arm of the savage. Then his strong arms encircled the savage's neck and both went down.

The tomahawk clanged on the ledge. The savage knowing that his game was foiled emitted a fearful war-whoop.

It was a terrible signal.

Every man in the camp was upon his feet. Rifles were grasped and the semblance of a defense instantly organized.

But in that moment the great plain became alive with dusky forms. It seemed as if thousands were rushing forward to the attack.

Meanwhile Frank had sprung to the aid of his brave young defender. The savage might have got the best of Clare.

But Frank dealt a terrific blow upon the savage's head which knocked him senseless. Clare scrambled to his feet.

Over the ledge both scrambled barely in time to avoid a shower of bullets.

Bent and Dale had rallied their men and were holding the ledge against the attacking redskins.

Barney and Pomp were on the deck of the Racer debating whether to use the electric gun or not. They hailed Frank's coming with joy.

"Fo' de Lor, Marse Frank," cried Pomp, "I done fot yo' was killed by dem Injuns!"

"Be jabbers, we cum mighty near using the electric gun on the omadhouns!" declared Barney.

"I wish you had," said Frank, "but lively now, or they will be in the camp! Bring out some projectiles!"

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, Clare climbed aboard the Racer. With Barney and Pomp he opened fire with repeating rifles.

While Frank worked the electric gun. It seemed as if the savages were legion in number.

Right up to the camp entrance they surged. It was evident that they meant to concentrate all their overwhelming numbers and sweep the camp out of existence.

All had been well planned, though it was not as much of a surprise as they had probably intended.

CHAPTER IX.

THE APACHES REPULSED.

It was lucky for Bent and his men that the Racer had not already left them for the scene of a distant fray.

If it had, not a man of them would have survived to tell the tale of a terrible massacre.

But the moment the deadly electric gun began to get in its work, there was a change.

The terrible dynamite shells bursting in their midst were inexplicable and appalling to the Apaches.

One repulse is all that is ever necessary with a body of Indians. Open and persistent fighting is not their style of warfare.

As the terrific dynamite burst through their midst, they wavered.

Frank repeated the dose as rapidly as he could. There was one moment of uncertainty.

The plainsmen were being forced back, and two of them were dead and scalped.

But the next appalling thunderbolt gave the Apaches a panic. They rolled back, made a faint attempt at rallying and then fled.

In less time than it takes to tell it, they had vanished out over the great plain. The battle was over.

But Frank sent charge after charge of dynamite across the surface of the prairie to break up the nest of vipers and sicken them of further attack.

Scarcely one of the plainsmen had escaped some sort of a wound. Two of them were dead.

But the remaining eight were dead game and actually wanted to go in pursuit of the savages.

Frank, however, called up Bent and Dale and explained the situation to them and the meaning of the distant fire.

The two plainsmen were instantly excited and ready to go to the rescue.

"But we'll have to break camp here," said Frank, "and that will take time; we may be too late."

"Yet what else can we do?" asked Bent.

"I had thought of rushing on ahead to the rescue with this machine," said Frank, "but I fear now that you will be left in deadly peril."

"Never mind us," said Bent; "go ahead. Thar are wimmen an' children tew save, yew know."

"Exactly," agreed Frank, "but I cannot consent to sacrifice you. We must arrange some other plan. Give orders to strike camp as quickly as possible!"

Bent hurriedly gave this order. When the plainsmen understood the true state of affairs, they were much excited.

In less time than one would expect the camp was struck, and the hardy band of Indian fighters were ready to leave the spot.

There might have been some little risk in leaving their present position of vantage, had it not been for the electric gun.

But it was quite certain that the Apaches would not venture an open attack within range of that deadly article. So the party boldly ventured forth.

Two miles over the plain was not such a great distance, and the men were able to march at the double quick and carry their camp equipage, too. On they ran behind the Racer.

The distant fire had seemed to be dying out, and the sounds of the battle were certainly growing more desultory. It meant one of two things.

Either the savages were completing their victory or else they had been repulsed and were falling back.

Clare stood on the deck beside Frank, and his face was very pale, and his nerves very tense.

"God help us to get there in time," he murmured; "but for that other attack we would have done so."

"Yes," agreed Frank, "we would. But I feel confident that Haines, after fighting the savages so long, has once more beaten them back."

But at that moment Clare gave a mighty start.

"Look!" he shouted. "There the red fiends go over the summit of that butte! No doubt it is a dodge to take the whites in the rear. For God's sake press on! We must save them!"

It was the search-light's glare that had revealed this. The sides of the butte were indeed covered with savages. The next moment fierce sounds of a conflict were renewed.

Up flashed the light again. Then it was seen from whence this came.

Upon a spur of the hill a number of red demons were heaping brush and firing it. Very likely this sent a light down into the besieged camp, and enabled the savages to the better direct their attack.

It was evident that succor was coming none too soon to the battle-worn members of the caravan. On rushed the party.

Now only a fifth of a mile intervened. Frank was determined to accept a risk.

He went up and trained the electric gun upon the savages on the top of the butte. A moment later a shell went hissing up into their midst.

The aim was good and there was an awful explosion. The slaughter was terrific.

The other savages turned and saw the great white eye of light on the plain far below. It was advancing toward them.

They had never seen anything like it before.

Steadily it advanced toward them. Then another awful volcano in their midst settled affairs for them.

The survivors burst into a mad and precipitate retreat.

In less time than it takes to tell it the summit of the butte was clear. One nest of the demons was broken up.

A shell into the pile of burning brush scattered it and killed the savages tending it. The next moment the Racer rounded the eminence.

The search-light threw its rays into a narrow passage leading between high rocky walls.

This was obstructed with boulders and behind these crouched the gamy defenders of the lost caravan.

Six haggard and blood-stained men, nearly every one with a wound, came forth to greet the rescuers. Brave Jeff Haines was their leader. Back of them was the retreat which they had held for so many months against almost daily attacks of the Apaches. It was a sort of pocket in the side of the butte.

Nothing could exceed the heroism of this little party of isolated settlers battling for their lives and their families in this awful wilderness and against a fierce horde of savages.

Many of the women and children had succumbed to hardship. There were sorrowing hearts and sad hopes for all.

It had seemed a hopeless fight. Without relief there had seemed no chance for them.

They had not hoped for rescue. How could a relief party expect to find them in this fearful remote part of the earth?

But yet the six surviving men had fought on doggedly. A few hours more, however, would have sealed their fate, for their ammunition was giving out.

To express the wild joy of the rescued people would be an utter impossibility.

They were frantic in their demonstration of happiness. It seemed to them a new lease of life.

And as the dynamite shells of the Racer quickly drove the Apaches back, daylight appeared in the east as if to crown the occasion.

Then Dick Clare found himself face to face with Mr. Lewis. The pioneer's face was ashy pale.

"Dick," he cried, "thank God you escaped with your life!"

"And you," replied Clare; "but Mrs. Lewis, and—Eva—"

Lewis gave a gulping cry.

"My wife is nigh crazy," he said, huskily; "Eva is gone!"

"Gone?"

Clare fairly shrieked the word.

"Yes," said Lewis, with a spasm of awful pain. "I fear we shall never see her again."

Clare forced the heart-broken man to explain matters in the quickest way. He gave a thrilling tale.

For weeks they had been unmolested in this mountain retreat. While they knew that the Apaches were all about them, yet no attack was made.

So that they had gradually relapsed into a feeling of security, believing that the red foe would not dare attack them. This was fatal.

One day when the Indians had not been heard from for many days, Mr. Lewis and two other men ventured outside the pocket to hunt antelope. They were mounted upon the wagon train horses which they had brought with them on the raft.

Eva was a daring horsewoman, and pleaded hard for the privilege of going with them.

At first her father had denied her.

"Oh, if I had only stuck by that denial," he cried, in agony. "My darling child would be with us now!"

But as the little hunting party emerged upon the table-land no sign of Indians was visible. The coast seemed clear.

A herd of antelope was sighted and the hunt began.

In the excitement Eva became slightly separated from the others. Suddenly a startling thing happened.

Up from behind a ridge in the plateau there sprang a score of Indians and their ponies, which were trained to lie down in the grass.

With a wild war whoop they swept down toward the hunters. Rifles cracked and for a few moments a lively fight ensued.

But Eva had been some little distance from her companions, and before she could rejoin them the red fiends had swept down like a cloud about her.

In a twinkling she was a captive and being carried away in the yelling horde. The frantic white hunters pursued, even at the risk of their lives.

But they might as well have followed an *ignis fatuus*. The wily Apaches slipped their pursuers and so skillfully covered their trail that they could be traced no further.

Words can hardly express the horror and anguish of all. Sadly and slowly they rode back to camp with the dread news.

The name of the chief of this band of Apaches was known as Flat Nose. He was a merciless monster, and the Table Hills was his stronghold.

This was the narrative to which several listened. Clare was nearly prostrated with the awful news. It seemed to him as if the light of his life had gone out in darkness.

CHAPTER X.

FRANK'S CLEVER PLAN.

BUT among those who stood by and listened was Frank Reade, Jr. The young inventor's face was grim.

Clare had picked up his rifle and started for the canyon. Frank managed to step in front of him.

"Where are you going, Dick?" he asked.

The youth turned his agonized gaze upon him.

"Need you ask?" he said. "I am going to rescue her or die in the attempt."

"Wait," said Frank, calmly, "don't do anything rash."

"I am not."

"You are."

"What?"

"I mean just what I say," declared the young inventor. "You are acting most rashly. In the first place it is madness for you to set forth alone to rescue that girl. You can't do it."

"Then I can die!" said the youth, desperately.

"That will do you little good," said Frank, reprovingly. "Listen to reason. There is a better way."

Clare's face lit up.

"God bless you!" he exclaimed. "You will help me?"

"I will."

"I will then leave all to you. Heaven will reward you," said the youth, fervently. "But—will we not act soon?"

"Immediately," replied Frank.

The sun was now high in a clear sky. The report spread through the camp that an effort was to be made to rescue Eva Lewis.

The besieged men were to turn about and hunt their foes. Flat Nose was to be tracked to his den.

Of course there could be nothing but guesswork regarding the fate of Eva Lewis.

In the power of such a wretch as Flat Nose the worst was to be feared. But now a new face was put upon matters by a declaration of Bent's.

"I kin tell ye why thar's good reason tew hope tew find ther gal all safe," he said. "Thar ain't no Apache would hev scrupled much about hevin' her yaller scalp at his girdle, yew kin bet."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Clare, "she is in the hands of the Apaches."

"Mebbe yew think so!"

"Is she not?"

"Wall, yes, but this ere Flat Nose ain't no more of an Apache than you or I, my friend."

This announcement created a sensation.

"Do you know that for a fact?" asked Frank Reade, Jr.

"In course I do," replied the plainsman, positively. "I reckon I orter. Flat Nose is a white man an' he wuz as tough a sport as ye ever knew in early days on the Brazos."

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, I do. Arter he had killed his fourth man down thar, the people turned pizen on him an' he had tew skip inter ther Llano. Then he fell in with Big Lip, the Apache chief, an' made friends with him. He got to be a chief and is the big gun called Flat Nose to-day."

Frank Reade, Jr., saw the point at once. He understood now what Bent had meant by his first statement.

Flat Nose no doubt would endeavor to compel his fair captive to become his squaw. In that event he would not of course seek her life.

It was necessary to lose no time in effecting her rescue.

Plans were quickly made. The stronghold or camp of Flat Nose was believed to be in a similar pocket in the hills about twelve miles below on the river bank.

It was decided to make a feint at leaving the hills for the Pecos. Then when the savages were drawn from their camp, as they undoubtedly would be, a retrograde move could be made to cut them off and attack their stronghold at a moment when it was weakly guarded.

In the execution of this move great dependence was placed upon the Racer.

While the machine was cutting the Apaches off from their den and holding them at bay, the rescue party were to descend upon it and endeavor to effect the rescue of Eva Lewis.

All this was clearly outlined and looked like an excellent scheme. The move was made an hour later.

Some of the horses had been saved through all the vicissitudes of the caravan and upon these the women and children were placed.

The men marched with Bent and his force, while the Racer led the way.

Careful outlook was kept to guard against a sudden attack. But no signs of the foe were seen.

It was hoped to reach the base of operations by high noon, the distance being about twelve miles. Steadily they moved onward.

The river here wound through deep canyons among the Table Hills and one could stand upon a fearful verge and look down a thousand feet or more to the ribbon of water below.

But just before it emerged and crossed the plain to join the Pecos there was a series of rugged heights.

It was among these in a deep pocket that the Apache chief was reputed to have his stronghold.

As the caravan approached this critical point there was some little excitement. Some looked for an attack from the savages.

But no sign of them was visible thus far. They were to all appearances in closest hiding, if indeed they were in the vicinity at all.

But Frank had laid his plans shrewdly. He made no feint to approach the hills, or make an attack, but rather pressed on by as if to make for the Pecos.

This ruse, as intended, completely deceived the savages.

When the train had left the hiding-place of the Apaches fully a mile behind, there appeared to the southward a mighty body of plumed horsemen.

These were riding swiftly in a direction which would surely cut off the caravan before it could leave the hills.

Frank indulged in a chuckle.

He stopped the Racer and the caravan came to a halt. Their position thus in a depressed plain was seemingly most disadvantageous.

The Apaches were not slow to take advantage of what they fancied was a grand opportunity to harass their white foe.

They deployed into irregular groups south and east and kept riding nearer, partly shielded by the rise in the plain. All this suited Frank well.

He could have thrown a shell into their midst, but he did not care to do this. His plans were much deeper.

He pretended much fear and a shrinking from conflict by ordering a slow retreat for a half mile or more. This brought them to a ridge of land extending westward to the hills.

Here he affected to make a stand. The savages never suspected his real motive.

They made no move to surround the caravan. They knew that the impassable canyon was at the north and their own stronghold due west.

With their own lines ranging east and south, they believed the white men well hemmed in and consequently easier in their power.

But for once Flat Nose reckoned without reason. He was destined to be deceived.

He saw that the caravan was in an exposed position, and believed that his white quarry was trapped. All that was necessary was to close in upon them.

So he began to draw down upon his intended victims. He little realized his mistake. He had a greater general than himself to contend with.

Frank made his plans quickly. The women and children were corralled just in the rear of the Racer. Then every able man in the caravan equipped himself for the attack upon the stronghold.

They were led by Jack Dale, that prince of Indian strategists, and thus equipped the start was made.

Back of the ridge of land they made their way easily to the base of the hills. Clare rode beside Bent and Lewis.

Only Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp, were left to guard the camp. But with the electric gun Frank did not deem this a difficult matter.

Into the hills rode the attacking party silently. Then they were obliged to leave their horses and go forward on foot.

Scrambling over the rocky ground, they had soon gained a broad stretch of rock leading to a precipice. Under this was the pocket which made the den of the Apaches.

Scores of rude huts and wigwams were there. About them were groups of women and children, engaged in various occupations.

Everything was characteristic of an Apache camp. Old crones were rocking and crooning and plying their needles in the manufacture of blankets. Squaws were dressing hides or making pottery.

Children romped with dogs and young lads were practicing with arrows and spears. The scene was closely scanned by the white men.

But a few Apache braves were seen. All were out with Flat Nose.

As his gaze wandered over the array of wigwams, Clare wondered in which of these his true love, Eva Lewis, was confined.

But now the signal for the advance was given.

Right and left the men were deployed and crept down over the ledges of rock. At a given signal they sprang into the camp.

The scene baffles description. Instantly all was the wildest excitement and confusion and uproar.

The squaws and papposes ran yelling and screaming wildly about, evidently fancying that their last hour had come. Some of them even made a show at defence.

But a dozen of the white settlers hastily corralled them, and then Bent and Dale and Clare proceeded to make a search of the wigwams.

From one to another they went hurriedly. But each was empty. Search as they would no trace of the fair captive could be found.

Horace Lewis staggered, faint and sick at heart. Clare was giddy with horror and disappointment.

The worst was feared.

"My God! she has been killed!" groaned the father. "We are too late! All is lost!"

"Hold on," said Bent, savagely, "we'll know the truth! Bring me that squaw over yonder with that yaller an' crimson blanket. She's a chief's wife, an' mebbe she kin tell suthin'."

Two of the settlers dragged the squaw forward. Then Bent proceeded to catechise her.

But she was sullen and would not give him an answer.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RESCUE.

BENT did all in his power to make the squaw speak; but she was obdurate.

"Give her a touch av lariat over her thick hide," said Dale, "then she'll forget that trick."

"I've another plan, pard," said Bent.

He drew from his coat a small pocket mirror. This he held up to the squaw's gaze.

Nothing could so appeal to a squaw's vanity or desire as a pocket mirror. The brilliant reflection was at once a charm and a mystery.

Bent placed the pocket mirror before her. Then he drew his knife and laid its keen blade against his throat. Then he laid it down beside the mirror.

For a moment the Indian woman hesitated.

The secrets of her tribe were sacred. But the vanity of her crafty nature was supreme. Woman is woman in her deceptions and her frailties the world over.

She understood the scout's act as well as words. Then she reached forward and picking up the mirror thrust it into her bosom.

Drawing herself up, she spoke curtly in the Apache tongue.

"White-faced squaw in cave. Go by tall stones, lift flat rock, find hole in mountain side. She there!"

Dale knew the Apache tongue and translated this. Horace Lewis was like a new man, so great was his joy and also Clare's.

Then Eva was alive. This was something.

"You must show us the spot," said Bent, sternly. "We do not know how to find it!"

The squaw seemed to understand him for she pointed to an angle in the mountain wall. Beyond it was a cleft and at the end of this two tall monoliths placed there curiously by Nature could be seen.

"Hurrah!" cried Bent. "Come with me, two of ye. The rest stay here!"

Lewis and Clare responded. In a few minutes they had reached the spot indicated.

It was but a moment's work to lift the stone aside, and the aperture was seen. The very moment daylight was flashed into the place a low, glad cry was heard.

We will draw a veil over what followed. The meeting between the rescued girl and her father and lover was sacred.

The rescue had been effected. But a distant dull roar was heard. It was quickly followed by another.

"The electric gun!" exclaimed Clare. "Frank is having a fight with the Apaches. We must go at once. He may need our help."

To the surprise of the squaws they were not all butchered, but suffered to crawl away into their wigwams while the white men disappeared over the ledges.

When the party came in sight of the plain again a thrilling sight was revealed.

The Apaches, headed by Flat Nose, were making a desperate attempt to capture the Racer.

But Frank, at the electric gun, was hurling death among them. This had the effect of sweeping them back like a living wall.

But yet they were singularly persistent in the attack; not until after the ground was strewn with their mangled bodies did they desist.

Then they fell back in great confusion. Once more Frank Reade, Jr., and his wonderful Electric Racer had won a great victory.

The plainsmen now hurried forward over the ridge. Eva rode a spare horse, and the distance was quickly covered.

It is needless to say that the party received an ovation from the others. It was a happy incident.

The electric gun kept the Apaches at a respectable distance. And now a new turn in affairs was witnessed.

Beyond the big ridge and riding out from the hills, was seen a party of squaws and braves. They were making for the Apache line in the south.

"Heigho!" cried Frank, "they are carrying the news to Flat Nose. Wonder how the old fellow will take it?"

"I venture not very pleasantly," laughed Clare, "but what do we care now? We can bid them defiance, and all thanks to you and your electric gun, Mr. Reade!"

Quickly the next move was decided upon. This was to push on to the Pecos. Thence it would be safe traveling to Sumner.

Frank had agreed to escort the settlers to the fort safely. There was plenty of promise of lively incidents yet.

The party was soon under way again. The keenest watch was kept of the savages.

They were not allowed to approach too close. A shell from the dynamite gun always sufficed to scatter them.

That Flat Nose was furious over the invasion of his stronghold and the rescue of Eva Lewis, there was no doubt. He continued to persistently follow the caravan.

He was looking for another chance to make an attack upon more favorable ground.

"That is characteristic of the monster," declared Mr. Lewis. "He will not abandon a project so long as there is a living chance to execute it."

"Well," said Frank, coolly, "he will hardly gain in the end for I may make up my mind to exterminate his whole gang."

"You can certainly do it," agreed the settler, "and it would be a blessing to the West."

Steadily onward the expedition made its way. Soon they were descending the slope of the Table Hills.

The wide plain extending to the Pecos lay before them. Once this river was reached and crossed it would seem that the Apaches must abandon the pursuit.

But there was yet a considerable distance to cover, and affairs might at any time take a turn in favor of the Apaches.

The plain lay dry and arid in the glare of the sun. The grasses were white and brittle with the killing effect of the heat.

"I wish we had our raft now!" declared Lewis. "It would be much easier drifting down to the Pecos and a simpler matter to cross when we got there."

All agreed to this. But such a thing was out of the question. There was no material at hand to construct a raft of.

So the caravan plodded on down into the plain. The Apaches had mysteriously disappeared.

"Perhaps they have given up the chase," ventured Clare.

But Bill Bent shook his head.

"Don't ye reckon on that," he said; "they'll show up jest when ye ain't lookin' fer 'em."

And this prediction was verified.

The caravan was right in the heart of the plain. Suddenly Jack Dale gave a sharp cry:

"Look yonder, pards!"

All eyes were turned to the south. A great black cloud tinged with flame was sweeping up from the plain.

In an incredibly short space of time it had mounted high in air and spread with race horse speed east and west.

A running, leaping line of fire.

Instantly all in the caravan saw the deadly purpose of the Apaches. The awful swift running prairie fire was a peril not to be ignored.

"My soul!" exclaimed Horace Lewis; "if that overtakes us we are lost!"

"Make for the river!" cried Frank Reade, Jr., "it is a matter of life or death.

"That's right!" cried Bill Bent. Then his face turned ashen pale.

He saw the helpless women and children. It was an awful outlook for them.

Strong men could have accepted chances in reaching the river. But these weaklings could hardly hope to get there by any ordinary means.

Clare instinctively sprang to the side of the girl he loved. Men took places by their families.

"Go and leave us!" they said to the others. "We can die but once!"

But Frank Reade, Jr., had formulated a plan almost as rapidly as he had taken in the situation. His loud, clear voice rose above the tumult.

"You will do what I tell you, if you wish to be saved," he cried. "Attention all!"

They flocked to him as to a Savior. Quickly Frank laid out his plan.

"Put the women and children on the deck of this machine!" he cried, "they are light and I can carry them. Then all you that can, mount the horses. Each horse ought to carry two men. Those on foot I will return for. If we can reach the bottom lands of the river we are saved."

Wild cheers burst from the desperate men. Instantly Frank's orders were carried out.

The women descended from the horses and got aboard the Racer. They crowded the machine.

It could not have carried the same number of men. But as Frank had declared the freight was lighter.

The horses were mounted, two on each. This left four men on foot. They were Bent and Dale, Lewis and Clare.

The chances for them to reach the river on foot were slight. It was full three miles, and the prairie fire was coming on like lightning.

But the quartette were cool and determined. They waved farewell to the others, and Clare gave Eva a parting look, which spoke worlds.

Then the Racer was off.

The horses went galloping on behind. Of course the machine outstripped them.

It reached the river bank. As quickly as possible Barney and Pomp assisted the women and children to alight.

By this time the horsemen had come up. One and all gave a backward glance over the plain.

The sight was appalling.

The fire was reaching high to the zenith, and the flames and smoke obscured the sun. It was a fearful spectacle.

But the party had but one thought. What of the four brave men on foot?

It was seen to be clearly impossible for them to outstrip the fire. They would surely be overtaken.

What then was to be done? All eyes turned to Frank Reade, Jr. The young inventor gave one sweeping look at the heavens, and then cried:

"Come, Barney and Pomp. There is a chance for us to save them."

Instantly the two faithful companions of the young inventor sprang aboard the machine. Frank opened the lever and it was off.

Away it sped over the plain.

The fleeing men had hardly covered a mile. They were spent and nigh fainting with their efforts. Every moment the great, roaring, awful mass drew closer down upon them.

It threatened to overwhelm them in its embrace. The heat even at that distance could plainly be felt and was overpowering.

"My soul!" gasped Horace Lewis, staggering wildly. "My brain is bursting, I believe I shall have to give up."

"Keep up!" cried young Clare, cheerily. "We have yet time."

Bent and Dale now came forward, and each grasping an arm dragged the fainting man on.

"Go—go and leave me," said Lewis. "I am willing to die. Let me go and save yourselves."

But the two brave men still clung to him. It was not like them to leave a comrade in distress.

On and on they staggered. Every moment the air grew more stifling. And yet the river was far away.

What was to save them? The awful presence of death was upon them. There seemed no hope.

CHAPTER XII.

THRILLING EVENTS—THE END.

LEWIS at length sank down, utterly unable to proceed further. In vain his companions tried to rally him.

The desperate men looked at each other. Life was yet dear. They might possibly save themselves.

But to leave a comrade in distress was something against their honor. They could not do it.

There did not seem a ghost of a chance for their salvation, but yet Bent said hoarsely:

"Take his shoulders, Jack—I'll catch on to his feet."

They lifted the helpless man between them and staggered on. But the air began to grow suffocatingly close. Clare pressed alongside and did his part.

Suddenly Bent stumbled and sank down.

"No use, pards," he whispered; "we're done fer. It's all up with us!"

But Dick Clare leaped forward with sudden recuperation. His eyes shone like stars.

"No!" he shouted. "We are saved. Here is help!"

The next moment a great body shot forward through the grass. A loud voice hailed them.

It was the Racer with Frank Reade, Jr., at the keyboard. One moment it stopped beside them and right under the awful rolling clouds of smoke.

Then Barney and Pomp leaped down. The next moment they had lifted Lewis over the rail. The others sprang aboard and the Racer was off for the river.

Out of the mass of smoke she ran and Frank put on all speed. There was full need of it.

The awful racehorse of fire behind them was coming madly. It seemed certain to overtake them.

That race to the river none ever forgot. It was a fierce and desperate one.

On and on rolled the machine faster and faster. All the furies of a volcano pursued.

It seemed an eternity ere the river came into view. But all things must have an end and soon the river bank was but fifty miles away.

The entire party of settlers had fled into the swampy bottom land, where the fire could not reach them. Frank saw that he was in a desperate predicament.

To force the machine down into the bottom land was to incur the risk of miring it. To remain on the bank was to ruin it in the awful heat of the flames.

He saw a small cape of land jutting out into the river a short distance below. If the machine could reach this there would be a chance.

With Frank to think was to act.

Quick as a flash he turned the Racer in that direction. It was a narrow squeeze. At the angle in the shore which turned upon the cape the waters of the river came within a few feet of the bank, the bottom land terminating here.

But just as this point was reached an awful catastrophe occurred. The fire made one swoop and descended upon the machine.

The pilot house windows shattered into a thousand pieces. The keyboard rolled up like paper, and the electric wire connections melted.

Frank was prostrated and would have died then and there but for Barney and Pomp.

These two faithful friends seeing Frank's plight sprang into the pilot house and grasped him. Bodily they carried him through the cabin and out onto the platform next to the river.

The machine had come to a halt against a stump and half tilted over the bank as if to fall into the river. Already Bent, Dale, Lewis and Clare had leaped down into the current.

Barney and Pomp, dragging Frank with them did the same. They were just in time.

Another moment and they would have all perished like rats in a trap. But what of the Racer? Its fate was sealed forever.

The fearful heat ruined its delicate machinery and consumed everything on board.

This was an awful catastrophe and in that moment it seemed as if Flat Nose had really gained the mastery after all.

But the end was not yet.

Frank revived with his fall into the water. He was quickly able to support himself in the current.

The seven men swam until they were able to crawl out upon the bottom land. Then in a few moments they had joined their companions.

Dejection most profound had resulted from the effects of the prairie fire. It had at once put a new face upon matters.

The party were left without their principal bulwark of defense. Not a scrap of the Racer was left, for the exploding dynamite aboard her had blown her into atoms.

The party were almost wholly without ammunition. In this state they were utterly at the mercy of the Apaches.

Doubtless Flat Nose would follow this fire right down to the river bank. When he should discover the helpless condition of his white foes, what a massacre there would be?

Moreover, the fire was rapidly burning out at the river bank. As soon as the smoke should clear their position would be unveiled.

In the face of this awful catastrophe what of Frank Reade, Jr.? The young inventor did not show the disappointment he felt over the loss of his machine.

Instead he was cool, alert and ready. He was not beaten yet.

It would have been easy for the men to have swam the river and made their escape. But here again was the awful, yet precious incubus of the women and children.

Of course, it was out of the question to leave them to the merciless tomahawks of the savages. They must be defended at any cost.

All understood the situation thoroughly. There was no need to discuss it. What was needed was action.

And instinctively all looked to Frank Reade, Jr. As ever the young inventor was not found wanting.

He quickly outlined a plan of action.

"We must fall back into the deep saw-grass by the water," he said. "It will be hardship for a time, until we can manage to cross the river. We will, at least, be in a better position for hiding and defense."

"Very good!" agreed Bent, "but how are we to cross the river?"

"Do you see that cottonwood close down by the water's edge?"

"Yes."

"We must fell that and make a small raft of its trunk and branches. There is a little rise of bank there which will protect the children and the women from the Indian bullets. Lively now!"

Thus Frank had already shaped a way out of what had seemed an almost hopeless difficulty. Very quickly the plan was carried out.

The women and children were ensconced under the bank and the work of felling the cottonwood was well under way, when amidst the smoke and ashes on the river bank there appeared a legion of mounted Indians.

They surveyed the bottom lands in a critical way. Then one of them descended and followed the plainly marked trail into the swamp.

He gave a yell of communication to his companions. In a moment the horde came swarming down into the bottom lands.

It was a critical moment.

All the white men had gripped their rifles and were awaiting the crisis. Frank Reade, Jr., saw that they were bound to be discovered.

So he gave the quiet order:

"Pick your man! Take good aim! Give it to them!"

A terrific volley came from the deep sawgrass. The Indians fell in heaps as the repeaters worked.

In a panic they fled back up the bank. Nearly twenty of their number were left dead on the bottoms.

They vanished beyond the line of the high bank, and made the air hideous with their yells. It was a time for congratulation among the whites.

But Bent said:

"The worst is to come. They will whip-saw us yet; ye see if they don't!"

The scout's words might have proved prophetic, but for a happy incident which was to transpire before long.

Frank hastened forward the building of the raft for the crossing of the river, and thus they were engaged, when suddenly Clare clutched his arm, and cried:

"My soul! look at that!"

Frank glanced up the river. Just beyond rifleshoot he saw an appalling and unexpected sight.

There in the river current were a number of ponies with plumed savages on their backs. They were swimming across the river.

At once Frank saw the game of the wily fiends. From the opposite bank the white settlers would be exposed to a deadly fire.

It seemed to seal the fate of the little party. Work ceased on the cottonwood raft.

"God help us!" said Lewis. "We are truly lost! I fear that we will never survive this. Not one of us will be spared this day!"

An appalling gloom settled down upon the party. The children began to cry plaintively and the women to wring their hands with despair.

It stirred the souls of the men to desperation. They set their stern faces to the north bank of the river and waited for the attack.

Soon a fusillade was begun from the south bank. This could not be answered, as the foe could not be seen.

"Keep your ammunition," said Frank. "We will find good use for it yet."

And now tufted heads were seen coming down the opposite side of the stream.

The women and children, as well as possible, were concealed behind the branches of the fallen cottonwood.

But just at this moment, when all seemed lost, there came rescue. The magic of that word!

From the distance down the river there was heard the stirring notes of a bugle. In a moment every man was upon his feet with a ringing hurrah.

"The soldiers!" they cried. "We are saved—saved!"

Words can hardly do justice to the scene which followed.

Men flung themselves into the river to swim across and aid the cavalry in their fight with the savages. A lively battle ensued.

But the carbines of the troopers and their irresistible charges scattered the redmen like chaff. They broke and fled incontinently.

In a very few moments they were conferring in surprise with the party of settlers whom they had so unwittingly rescued.

Col. Latimer of the —th U. S. Cavalry from Fort Sumner had taken this ride in pursuit of a gang of horse thieves, never dreaming of running upon a band of white men besieged by Apaches.

Of course he was glad to have effected the rescue, and the rest of the story is easily told.

The cavalry stayed only long enough to beat off the Apaches. Then they proceeded to escort the band of settlers to Fort Sumner.

Frank and Barney and Pomp for lack of a better move went with them. At the fort they were royally received.

Frank Reade, Jr. was the hero of the hour. His plucky fight in defense of the lost caravan made his fame.

For some days all remained at Sumner. A detachment was sent down to exterminate Flat Nose and his gang. But the wily renegade had fled from the Table Hills.

The settlers who had survived the terrible journey to the Pecos settled safely upon their lands and were not again molested by the Apaches.

Bill Bent and Jack Dale went back to Tascos where they were received as genuine heroes. But Bill would declare:

"I tell yew we wudn't hev been in it but fer thet young feller, Frank Reade, with his electric Racer, yew bet!"

In due time Frank with Barney and Pomp returned to Readestown. They did not soon forget their thrilling adventures on the Llano Estacado in quest of the Lost Caravan.

Of course Frank began work on a new invention of which we may tell something at a future day.

[THE END.]

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